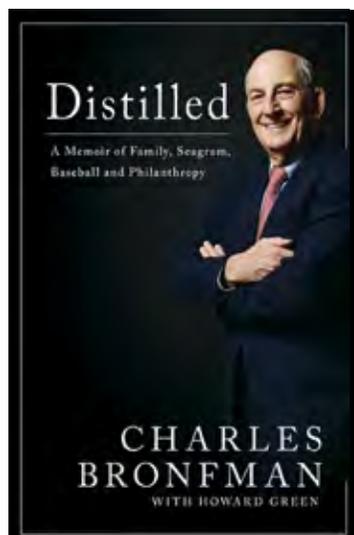


# Book Reviews



## An Exceptionally Rich Life

Charles Bronfman,  
with Howard Green

*Distilled: A Memoir of Family, Seagram, Baseball and Philanthropy.*

Toronto, Harper Collins Canada, 2016.

Review by Anthony  
Wilson-Smith

The very rich, F. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote, “are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them; makes them soft, where we are hard, cynical where we are trustful.” The very rich Charles Bronfman puts the lie to that. Here’s part of the opening paragraph of *Distilled*, his compelling memoir: “My life, like most people’s, has been a mixed bag—substantial achievements, serious disappointments; great loves, poor ones; various careers, some

exciting, others mundane, critical illnesses, wonderful health.”

So much, then, for the mystique around rich people: those emotions are familiar to many people. But then, Charles has never been interested in mystique or any other form of putting on airs. He’s far too grounded.

At an astonishingly youthful 85 years of age, Charles—he is always known simply by his first name to acquaintances—radiates contentment, good humour, and rare self-awareness. That he has attained such grace is good news, but no guarantee of an engaging read. What makes *Distilled* compelling is *how* he has done so. Co-written with the accomplished business journalist Howard Green—who does an exceptional job of drawing out Charles’ authentic voice—*Distilled* walks us through events that range from early struggles with anxiety and self-doubt through the triumphs and tragedies of his adulthood. Those have included a loving but uneven relationship with his older brother, Edgar; the sudden, shocking death of his beloved wife Andy; and the obliteration of billions of dollars of family wealth in business dealings he opposed from the outset. His high times and achievements include founding Canada’s first major-league baseball team; rubbing shoulders with the successive leaders of three countries (Canada, the United States, Israel); the focus on philanthropy that has touched several generations of young Canadians and Jews around the world and, by his own description, brought him his greatest joy.

His friendships straddle all walks and levels of life, and a cornerstone of his existence is his deep devotion to family, including his children and stepchildren, and a happy new marriage in 2012 to the former Rita Mayo.

Full disclosure: as president and CEO of Historica Canada, I have every reason to wish Charles good things. He is

a co-founder and active board member of our organization, and the creator of our iconic Heritage Minutes. I can attest to his generosity, devotion to Canada, warmth, wry humour—and deserved expectation that the money he gives will be spent carefully and with specific purpose. Before this job, I had also seen those qualities in evidence in my previous life as a journalist.

At one level, Charles’ life is unimaginable to most. He grew up in a 20-room mansion in Montreal, surrounded by servants; alternately comforted and buffeted by loving but complex relationships with his three siblings and parents; and isolated from relationships with most people outside the family.

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As a “skinny lad with big protruding ears”, he endured “double pneumonia at five, pneumonia again at nine, and streptococcus while in early adolescence” before arriving at the good health that persists to this day. Daunted by his demanding father Sam and the charismatic but domineering Edgar, he struggled against insecurities until his 30s.

His personal life has always revolved around family—albeit in different forms. His first marriage, in

1962, produced his children Stephen and Ellen. It ended in 1980, when he fell head over heels for Andy Morrison, whom he had known since he had served as an usher at her first wedding. They were together until January, 2006, when she left their Manhattan home one rainy morning to walk their dog, and was struck by a car and killed. Her death, he recalls, was “the nadir of my life [which] changed for me irrevocably on that morning.” After a period of deep depression, followed by a short, on-the-rebound third marriage, he married Rita, whom he had known for years, in 2012. She has, he says, “made me an extremely happy, calm person.”

His business career began slowly, with a low-key role in the family’s worldwide Seagram liquor business. Charles came of age in his late 30s as the founding owner of the Montreal Expos baseball team. The financial and personal gamble inherent in doing so thrust him into the public eye, gave him confidence and a high-profile business to call his own, and taught him that his instincts were good.

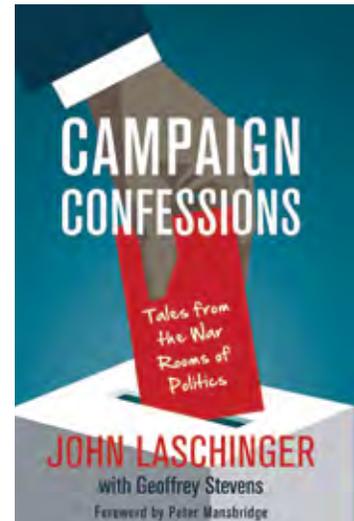
He would have done well to follow those instincts when it came to another defining occasion—the disastrous sale in 1995 of the money-spinning Dupont, in which Seagram was the biggest shareholder, followed by the purchase of the MCA entertainment company. That weakened Seagram’s financial position, and led to the sale of Seagram to France’s Vivendi. Those events cost the family, by various estimates, half to two thirds of its collective wealth. They also exposed festering divisions in the family, in particular between Edgar and Charles. The Seagram’s debacle began with Edgar’s unilateral decision to name his son, Edgar Jr., as his successor. He announced that without advising either the board of directors or Charles, who was vice-chair. Edgar Jr.’s infatuation with show business famously drove those calamitous deals. It all ended, Charles observes, “in disgrace, for everyone concerned—for the family, for me, for Edgar, for his son....” His anguish and frustrations with Edgar Sr. and anger with Edgar Jr., are obvious. As tough as Charles is on them, he is tougher on himself for not exercising the veto right he held. When it came

to big deals, he notes, “to some degree I had excluded myself and turned myself into a passive investor.’

But that debacle was followed by Charles turning his focus to the area for which he is best known: targeted philanthropy, which he calls “my greatest success.” He has disbursed more than \$325 million, and will eventually give away most of his remaining wealth. His areas of focus relate to “who I am—proudly Canadian (and proudly Jewish.” In the late 1990s, he pledged \$25 million to create the Historica Foundation (a co-founder of the present Historica). That was conditional on fellow enthusiast Lynton ‘Red’ Wilson getting the private sector to match those funds—as he did. The Minutes, of which there are more than 80, were born of his conviction that young Canadians lacked awareness of the ‘myths and legends’ that fuel national pride. His solution, 60-second vignettes that tell those stories, was an immediate and enduring hit. Last year, they were seen by more than 6 million people. His devotion to Jewish causes includes Birthright Israel, a program that allows young Jews to visit Israel for 10 days free of charge. To date, the program has registered more than 500,000 participants from more than 66 countries, and had a direct and indirect impact on the Israeli economy of a billion dollars over 15 years.

Some doubts and regrets about Charles’ life so far remain—especially around his tormented relationship with Edgar. But he concludes that their demanding father, Sam, correctly “sized us all up” in his views of his four children. In Charles’ case, Sam’s judgment was that “I would help burnish the family name.” His Dad, he proudly concludes, wasn’t wrong: “The kid who started out as a sickly, scrawny basket case has evolved into a contented, accomplished man with more friends than he can count.” He is all that—and all of us who are admirers are likely to feel even more so after reading this honest, enchanting, book. **P**

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## An Insider’s Guide to Campaigns

John Laschinger with Geoffrey Stevens

*Campaign Confessions: Tales from the War Rooms of Politics.* Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2016.

Review by Geoff Norquay

John Laschinger is one of a kind in Canadian politics. As Canada’s only full-time professional political campaign manager, “Lasch” has served as manager, director, senior strategist or advisor for 50 campaigns over the past 45 years.

Those campaigns constitute an impressive list: from John Crosbie’s losing federal PC leadership campaign in 1983 to Brian Peckford’s leadership and three successive provincial campaigns in Newfoundland and Labrador; from Don Getty’s winning leadership campaign in Alberta in 1985 to Olivia Chow’s unsuccessful mayoralty race in Toronto in 2014.

Distilling the insights from a lifetime spent in a process as complex as political campaigning requires some judgment and organization, and Laschinger and his co-writer, former *Globe and Mail* columnist Geoffrey Stevens, have solved this challenge admirably.

*Campaign Confessions* begins with two chapters that present Laschinger's principal thesis, that all political campaigns must address two essential issues—the desire for change and the management of expectations.

The balance of the book explores the basic subdivisions of political campaigning—candidate preparation, organization, public opinion research, vision, policy and values, the war room, social media, negative advertising, money and party discipline—with examples and anecdotes from the 50 campaigns presented as evidence and illustrations, as the “lessons learned” from both happy and painful experience.

On voters' attitudes towards change, Laschinger presents a common-sense rule of thumb:

“As long as the desire for change stays around the 50 percent level, it does not worry campaign managers for incumbents. When the number passes 60 and stays there, they know it is time to call in the movers and the document shredders.

“Once voters make up their minds that they want change, they typically express it in a decisive way—with a massive swing away from the incumbent and to the party or candidate that best represents the kind of change they want.”

If the desire for change and its impact on campaign outcomes are usually pretty obvious, managing the expectations of pollsters, pundits and the voting public is more subtle, Laschinger writes: “Politicians who meet or exceed expectations win elections; those who fail to measure up are the losers in election after election.”

In managing expectations, campaign managers face a host of risks and opportunities, including keeping the campaign on an even keel, avoiding overconfidence in front-runner campaigns and profound discouragement with long-shot candidates, and responding to mid-campaign events that can completely change the dynamics.

Laschinger quite rightly notes that the federal Liberal triumph in 2015 resulted from a huge desire for change and the

ability of Justin Trudeau to exceed the low expectations that plagued him—or perhaps blessed him—at the beginning of the campaign.

On the other hand, front-runners can lose momentum to changing expectations. When Rob Ford returned from rehab during the 2014 Toronto mayoralty campaign, his re-emergence undermined the advantage that Laschinger's candidate Olivia Chow had enjoyed as the pre-eminent anti-Ford candidate. That opened the door to John Tory as the non-Ford alternative who was not only a progressive but would keep municipal spending and costs down, and he subsequently cruised to victory. Chow was overtaken by events, while Tory had positioned himself perfectly.

In light of the recent election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, the chapter on negative advertising is both instructive and relevant. Laschinger begins the chapter with the delightfully unscientific observation of George Washington University political scientist John Sides that “Negative ads work, except when they don't.”

**“This is a superb book that should become the bible for anyone who finds themselves managing a political campaign for a school board, a municipal mayoralty, party leadership, provincial election or the House of Commons.”**

As experienced campaign practitioners know, effective negative ads must start with a believable premise and then be carefully balanced; a bit of humour can go a long way in softening the blow while reinforcing the barb.

Laschinger argues that “factual negative” ads work best because they “define your competition before the competition can define your candidate...they lay out questions that voters should want answered about a competitor so

that his or her positions can be compared to your candidate's positions.” He also notes the importance of checking negative ads with focus groups because they are the best way to ensure the right balance of tone has been achieved. What may make sense in the back room may be seen as over-the-top or far too personal or aggressive to the average voter.

On the famous “Just Not Ready/nice hair though” ad used by the Conservatives in 2015 election against Justin Trudeau, Laschinger notes the analysis of pollster Greg Lyle, whose research suggests the ad was very effective pre-writ and in the early part of the campaign, but lost its strength as the desire for change took over and Trudeau proved during the campaign that he was, actually, quite ready.

The book concludes with three pieces of sage and typically self-effacing advice from Laschinger on the essentials of successful campaign management:

- Associate yourself with quality candidates who have the desire to win regardless of their current standing in the polls;
- Use research wisely and widely to guide the campaign;
- Listen carefully and do not try to be the smartest person in the room.

This is a superb book that should become the bible for anyone who finds themselves managing a political campaign for a school board, a municipal mayoralty, party leadership, provincial election or the House of Commons. The insights are substantive and thoughtful and the examples instructive and to the point. Whether one is running the show or managing one of its component parts, there is a great deal of useful “how-to” here that describes what is important and what's not, the risks to manage, the pitfalls to avoid and the advantages to take in managing political campaigns. **P**

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